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## The Struggling Concept of Social Issues in Social Studies: A Discourse Analysis on the Use of a Central Concept in Syllabuses for Social Studies in Swedish Upper Secondary School

This is a study of how the concept of social issues was used in various ways in syllabuses for the school subject *Samhällskunskap* (Social Studies) in Swedish upper secondary school from 1965 to 2011. The concept is present in all syllabuses, be it with shifting status and position. A discourse analysis of syllabus texts shows how the concept of social issues in some contexts functions as a subject content among other contents, while functioning as a central, organizing principle in others. This analysis also shows how the use of the concept of social issues further indicates what educational philosophies and working methods are advocated in the syllabuses. The use of the concept may in turn be interpreted as part of a discursive struggle of powers between advocates of a differentiated upper-secondary school model on the one hand and advocates of a unified upper-secondary school model on the other. In this sense, the study of a single concept used in syllabuses may contribute to a discussion about larger educational discourse and the normativity embedded in education in general and in the school subject *Samhällskunskap* in particular.

### Keywords:

Social Studies, syllabus, social issues, upper secondary school, discourse analysis

### 1 Introduction: The school subject *Samhällskunskap* as an arena for the normative assignment of schools to foster citizenship

*Samhällskunskap* (Social Studies)<sup>1</sup> was established as a school subject in Sweden in the early 1960s, when it was separated from the school subject history. Before that, it was included as a special orientation within history. A subject called *Medborgarkunskap* (citizenship education) could be considered to be a forerunner in the curriculum from 1919 (Larsson 2011). After the Second World War, youth education was given the specific normative responsibility of moulding active democratic citizens for a democratic society. This assignment was given to schools in general, but there was a call for a specific subject to take the main responsibility for this normative agenda of education. *Samhällskunskap* was finally introduced in the comprehensive school in 1962 (following the curriculum of 1962, Lgr 62) and upper secondary school in 1965 (Lgy65) with this specific purpose. The assignment of fostering democratic citizenship connects to several academic disciplines such as political science, economics, sociology etc. The school subject, however, has no obvious affiliation with any specific academic discipline.

In the American context the situation is somewhat different. History still forms the foundation of Social Studies, but there is ongoing debate as to whether or not an issues-oriented approach or, for that matter, a wider representation of academic disciplines should be allowed

to challenge a more traditional, chronological teaching of history within Social Studies (Evans, 2004). Those conflicts are similar to those dealt with in Swedish secondary school, where there is an integrated approach that forms an alternative to the teaching of history, “sam-hällskunskap”, religion and geography separately. Even if *Samhällskunskap* in the upper secondary school, which is the focus of this article, is more clearly separated from these other subjects, tension still exists between the more narrow and the broader perspectives. We argue that there is good reason to refer to research on Social Studies, as the didactical and epistemological questions are comparable.

The syllabus for *Samhällskunskap* has changed over time with regards to what content, design or approach ought to define the subject. A simplified way of describing these changes is to say that the character of the subject is shifting within a field of tension between a predetermined content-orientation and an inquiry-based approach. Within the latter, the term *samhällsfrågor* (social issues) is central, since the virtues or abilities desirable of a citizen are best achieved through investigation and discussion of real social issues.

In the present study, we use the term social issues to translate the Swedish word *samhällsfrågor*. *Samhällsfrågor* could also be translated as “questions about society”, referring to matters of importance and relevance which are more or less open for discussion and interpretation. We aim to show how the concept of *social issues* has been used in syllabuses in *Samhällskunskap* for upper secondary school since 1965. We will show how the concept has taken various forms and has been given various meaning over time, and we will argue how this may be understood in terms of a struggle between different educational discourses. In other words, we wish to follow a larger discursive struggle in Swedish upper secondary school using the prominent yet changing concept of *social issues* as a lens. This further enables us to show how the arena of *Samhällskunskap* has been and still is an arena of crucial importance to the normative responsibility of fostering citizenship. To do so, we need to take our point of departure in an understanding of the school subject *Samhällskunskap* (Social Studies) in a wider context of curriculum reforms.

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These reforms were, in turn, for a long time part of an ongoing process towards a less differentiated school system.

During a political struggle in the early 1900s, conservative voices argued to keep academic and vocational education apart in a differentiated school system, whereas liberals and social democrats favored a more unified model in which the differences between educational programs were less obvious (Lundgren, 2012; Hartman, 2005; Edgren, 2011). Finally, a committee in 1946, appointed by a social-democratic government, lay the foundations for a unified compulsory school, which was realized in 1962. However, the upper secondary school (which is the focus of the present study) was still rather differentiated with the curriculum of 1965. At an organizational level, upper secondary school became less differentiated as a result of the 1970 curriculum reform for upper secondary school. However, the differentiation was still noticeable within the system since different programs had different time allocated as well as different goals and contents.

With the curriculum reform of 1994, a further step was taken towards less differentiation. All programs, including vocational programs, were now three years long, and a set of subjects – including *Samhällskunskap* – formed a common core with identical syllabuses for all programs. With passing grades, students from all programs would be eligible for university. However, this trend of a unified model for upper secondary school was broken with the latest curriculum reform of 2011 following a period of conservative government. Some of the syllabus reforms (1988, 2000) were carried out between major curriculum reforms and seem to anticipate some of the prominent changes of the curriculum to come (1994 and 2011).

The level of differentiation between the educational programs in upper secondary school may be seen to represent an ideological and philosophical struggle for what education is for in a society, and for whom. Since the school subject of *Samhällskunskap* has a clear normative agenda, we claim it to be significant for and especially sensitive to ideological changes in society.

### 1.1 Disposition

In the following, we wish to present prior research that focuses on Social Studies in Swedish youth education and that has connections to international counterparts. The international references are further outlined in the following section about our theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework of the present study concerns both educational philosophy in relation to Social Studies and critical discourse theories on how educational concepts and philosophies may be regarded as the result of struggling discourses. The section Theoretical Framework is given a rather prominent position in the article since part of our research interest is to connect our analysis of concept to larger theoretical outlooks (see research question two). The section Theoretical Framework is therefore not only a presentation of relevant theories but also a contribution to the

field of Social Studies research since we connect it to educational philosophy and ideological standpoints concerning the role of education in society.

After presenting the theoretical frameworks, we will present our methods for data material selection and methods of analysis. Our analysis then follows in which we examine the concept of Social Studies in the chosen syllabuses (from 1965, 1970, 1988, 1994, 2000 and 2011) and analyze how it is used in relation to other concepts that appear in the texts. In the final discussion, we will suggest how various uses of the concept of *social issues* relates to larger educational philosophical discourses and how these discourses are further oriented towards notions of differentiated or unified school models and ideologies.

## 2. Prior research

### 2.1 *Samhällskunskap* in Swedish youth education

The aim, character and content of the Swedish school subject *Samhällskunskap* has been explored from a range of perspectives, although research focusing on how to teach *Samhällskunskap* has just recently become more prevalent. There is only one study (Bjessmo, 1992<sup>ii</sup>) that deals explicitly with the concept of *social issues* (*samhällsfrågor*) as a central concept for the teaching of *Samhällskunskap*. In the study involving teachers of *Samhällskunskap*, Bjessmo describes the idea of using social issues as a point of departure as fundamentally new in many regards. It carries implications both for the interpretation of the subject content as well as for teaching methods. The subject is no longer primarily defined by specific content but rather by the issues. The teaching method advocated is inquiry-oriented, based on progressive ideas where the students decide what social issues to study. The syllabus provides little instruction as to what should be defined as a *social issue* and consequently, the teachers in the study show difficulties in separating social issues from the former “main elements” in the syllabus (Bjessmo, 1992, p. 31). Other research has shown that “current social issues” are usually dealt with in terms of short news presentations and as a separate track in the course (e.g. Karlsson 2011).

Most Swedish research on *Samhällskunskap* draws to some extent upon the work of Tomas Englund (1986). Englund explored citizenship education of schools with special reference to history and *Samhällskunskap*. Within a tradition of curriculum theory, he carried out a discourse analysis of political documents for the governing of schools, including the syllabus of *Samhällskunskap*. His conclusion is that there are different, competing subject conceptions that relate to dominant discourses. Englund (1986, p. 305 ff) describes the subject as being interpreted differently depending on three educational conceptions: the patriarchal, the scientific rational and the democratic. The discourse analysis is based on the identification of certain *determinants* which are “the fundamental factors conditioning the image of reality which such education is to convey and the view of knowledge which it expresses” (Englund, 1986, p. 193). This concept resembles the

analytical point of departure in the present study, the central but shifting concept of *social issue*, in the way that the determinants have shifting meanings depending on the discourse.

The political tension, where left-wing forces that favor progressive interpretations and right-wing forces stand for more conservative interpretations of educational concepts and purposes, is the foundation of Englund's (1986) understanding of the determinants. The bottom-line is that a chronological development exists where the democratic conception dominates from the 1980s and onwards. These curriculum theory perspectives have also been applied to the development of school in recent decades, where an important point is that the democratic conception is being challenged by a market-oriented conception with schools being guided by the ideas of new public management (e.g. Biesta 2010). However, the line of thought sketched out in the introduction of this article, which claims that the subject of *Samhällskunskap* may serve as a crucial example of how forces of a differentiated or unified school system work, may be strengthened by the results presented in the studies of both Agneta Bronäs (2000) and Christina Odenstad (2010). Bronäs (2000) shows how the content and the abstraction level of subject textbooks differ depending on whether the textbook is intended for use in a vocational or a theoretical program. Bronäs asks how this can be interpreted and motivated from a democratic point of view. Odenstad (2010) analyzed tests used in the subject and shows how tests in theoretical programs are more advanced and aim for higher abstraction than tests in vocational programs.

Studies of teacher and student attitudes to and notions of *Samhällskunskap* show that the concept of social issues is seldom presented as the defining concept of the school subject, or, as Bjessmo puts it, "the organizing principle" of the subject. (See Vernersson, 1999; Karlsson 2011; Karlefjärd, 2011; Bernmark-Ottosson, 2009; Wikman, 2003; Sandahl, 2011.) However, *social issues* do appear in one way or another in some of these studies. Some of the teachers interviewed by Ann Bernmark-Ottosson claim they "take departure in a current social issue" (Bernmark-Ottosson 2009, p. 77) when teaching, but the consequences of such statements are not clear. Based on a questionnaire given to a large number of teachers, Torbjörn Lindmark (2013) categorizes four subject conceptions: fact-and-concept-focused, value-focused, analysis-focused and citizenship-focused. He found that these conceptions were related to personal characteristic such as gender and to what other school subject the teacher taught. Although not the primary focus in the study, Johan Sandahl's (2011) study shows that teachers of *Samhälls-kunskap* feel they are dealing with social issues in their subject. His analysis of the school subject is based on Peter Seixas's concept *first and second order concept*. Sandahl (2011) found that teachers generally had a didactical idea that knowledge at the level of first-order concepts, be they basic concepts such as "state", "multinational enterprises" or "the UN" or more complex concepts such as "neo-

liberalism", "climate adjustment" or "development theory", always related to second-order concepts. Examples of second-order concepts in the subject are as follows: social science perspectives, social science causality, social science inference, social science evidence and social science abstraction. These examples may in turn be understood as abilities that students should develop through studying the content of *Samhällskunskap*. Sandahl emphasizes the importance of these second-order concepts being specific for the subject yet above the content level.

## 2.2 Social studies - Beyond the Swedish context

The research presented above focuses on *Samhällskunskap* as taught in Sweden. Other studies beyond the Swedish context are, of course, also of great relevance to our study, since they take their point of departure in a similar field of interest: the school's objective to teach about society and foster citizenship by working with issues, inquiries or current societal questions. These types of studies often recognize a field of tension between a position that may be understood as issues-centered and another position that may be understood as content-centered (cf. Evans, 2004; Ochoa-Becker, 2007; Barton, 2012; Ikeno, 2012).

Anna Ochoa-Becker interprets an issue-centered teaching of Social Studies as directly focused on the goal of developing the pupil's ability to participate in democratic processes and dialogues. The educational theorist Keith C. Barton also represents a position that aims to develop such abilities. Barton has studied Social Studies in international contexts and highlights the importance of understanding the national contexts for what constitutes successful teaching in social sciences. Barton emphasizes the ability of teachers to interpret and pass on a sense of a core or purpose in every school subject that in turn will help students to create meaning, especially in relation to their democratic life (Barton, 2012). Norio Ikeno (2012) argues that Social Studies in a Japanese school context is experiencing discursive changes towards a regression to a "back-to-basics" discourse that challenges prior efforts to organize interdisciplinary teaching based on social problems.

These glimpses of Social Studies research beyond the Swedish context represent a rather large field of educational research concerning how young people may be educated to become good citizens through the study of the past and through the study of contemporary society. The question of what makes a good and educated citizen and what abilities s/he ought to have has varied over time and between different educational contexts (cf. Olson, 2012; Olson et al., 2014). We will return to discussing how these questions have been dealt with theoretically in prior Social Studies research when presenting our theoretical framework below. We wish to contribute to this discussion in a way that has not, to our knowledge, yet been done. In Social Studies research in Sweden, there has been no analysis of the use in syllabuses of the central term *social issue*: even less light has been shed on the way these various uses connect to

a discursive struggle between educational philosophies. This is, we argue, a gap in Swedish Social Studies research that needs to be considered so that more can be understood about the normative agendas of *Samhällskunskap*.

### 3 Purpose and questions

The purpose of the present study is to investigate how the concept of *social issues* is used in the contexts of syllabuses from 1965 to 2011 for the *Samhällskunskap* (Social Studies) in Swedish upper secondary school. Its overall aim is to shed light on how a certain educational concept, including notions about what types of teaching and learning it refers to, is given various and shifting meaning depending on the hegemonic educational discourse it is used within. The questions guiding our analysis are as follows:

- How is the concept of *social issues* used in syllabuses for *Samhällskunskap* in upper secondary school from 1965 to 2011 in terms of status and relation to other concepts and with reference to educational ideas and ideologies of teaching?
- What role does the concept of social issues play in a larger educational context and in connection to normative ideas of the role of education in general and the role of the subject *Samhällskunskap* specifically?

### 4 Theoretical frameworks

#### 4.1 Social studies as an arena for discursive struggle

Theoretically, we wish to take our point of departure in an educational concept of meaning-making which claims that various ways of formulating goals and learning objectives correspond with various ideas of what type of meaning ought to be achieved within Social Studies (cf. Barton 2014, forthcoming). Within the field of Social Studies in general and the Swedish subject *Samhällskunskap* in particular, there are a few crucial syllabus-based indicators that are of certain interest regarding what type of meaning-making ought to be achieved in the classroom. The most prominent indicator in the present study is in what way, if at all, the concept of social issues is brought to the fore as a crucial point of departure in the organization of classroom activities in Social Studies. This indicator needs to be followed up by analyses of how the concept of social issues relates to formulations about students' activeness and initiative to a) raise issues in the classroom and to b) investigate them in inquiry-based classroom activities. Should the issues targeted in the Social Studies classroom spring from students' own interests and worldviews, or is it the teacher's responsibility to formulate questions with substance and relevance? Further, should these issues be tackled as phenomena open to student inquiry or as issues presented and explained by teachers?

However, teacher steered lessons on the one hand and inquiry-based working methods on the other are not the only parameters involved in the wordings around *Samhällskunskap* in the syllabuses of Swedish upper secondary school. While these analytical indicators touch upon working methods and didactical approaches (the question of *how*), there are other positions involved in the same field of tension that more so concern epistemology and the question of what teaching should lead to (the question of *why*). The American scholar Ronald Evans (1998; 2004; 2008; 2010) uses five categories to describe the "camps" that have been struggling to define Social Studies in terms of both objectives as well as content and teaching methods. The primary tension is that between an issues-centered approach and a content-centered approach. These camps are ever-present but weaker or stronger depending on other discursive elements at the time, such as political trends, wartime and the status of the economy (Evans, 2004). The camps favoring an issues-centered teaching model also represent an epistemological viewpoint that claims that the subject cannot be defined by predetermined content. The aim of these camps is based either on social meliorism or recon-structivism. The alternative camps are more based on ideas of the importance of predetermined content. The overall purpose of these ideas is either to reproduce the content of social sciences, to stress the scientific methods or to see Social Studies as a tool for social efficiency. Evans describes the struggle of dominance as a "turf war" where all progressive attempts to introduce more issues-centered approaches are met by resistance and where the reformers "underestimated the persistence of the grammar of schooling, basic aspects of schools, classrooms, and teaching that seem to defy change and to deflect attempts at reform" (Evans, 2004, p. 177).

Taking all this into account, there are two axes to be considered in the analysis. On one axis, the pendulum swings between *teaching or working approaches*, such as inquiry-based teaching with integrated subjects and social issues as the point of departure on the one hand, and teaching based on predetermined content in separate subjects on the other. On the other axis the pendulum swings more so between *different epistemological motives and purposes* with the purpose to instill predetermined knowledge content in students on the one hand, and the aim to help students develop a range of abilities on the other. The figure below suggests that one didactical approach may have shifting purposes

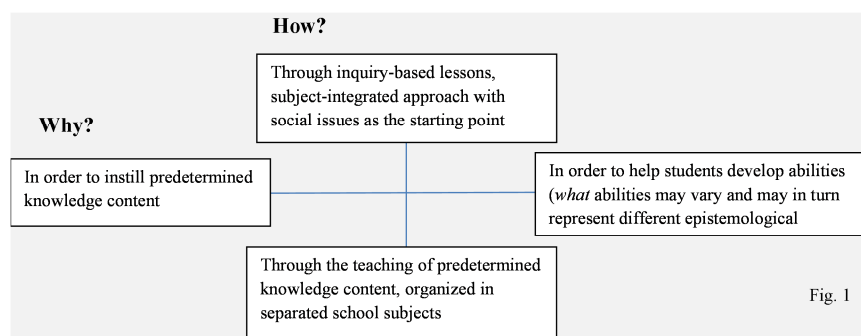


Fig. 1



or motives (*Why* should we educate?), since the same purpose may be achieved through various approaches and working methods (*How* should we educate?). Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that there are certain patterns and combinations that are more dominant than others.

The educational theorist Tomas Englund presents four different educational traditions that include notions of what ought to be taught, how it should be taught and why. The traditions are called educational philosophies of essentialism, progressivism, perennialism and reconstructivism (Englund, 1997). An essentialistic approach states that school subjects consist of certain core contents, mainly based on academic disciplines, and that schools should instill this in students (Englund 1997, p.135). An opposite approach, named progressivism, brings to the fore students' own experiences, knowledge and questions as the point of departure in education. The two other traditions named by Englund are placed in opposite positions to each other but represent a perhaps somewhat more explicit idea of the purpose of education. Perennialism is a conservative position which guards classical, traditional values and cultivation sets of knowledge, while reconstructivism aims for critical fostering with a political ambition to constitute a better society through education (Kroksmark 1989, p.134).

We choose to understand the various purposes and methods of education as part of hegemonic macro-level discourses relevant for society in general and education in particular (cf. Fairclough, 1989). Following this line of thought, the educational philosophical traditions presented by Englund in the above may be interpreted as discourses, struggling for hegemony in educational contexts. They all, in various ways, make claims about what is important knowledge and may thereby be positioned in the figure presented in the above, mainly regarding the overall purpose with education and the question *why* we should educate.

Both essentialism and perennialism seem to be grounded in a notion of the importance of instilling certain predetermined knowledge in students. While the essentialistic discourse uses academic knowledge and science as authority, perennialism relies on tradition. As for the progressive and reconstructive discourses, they both seem to aim for the development of certain kinds of abilities amongst students. However, the progressive discourse relies in the good democratic potential of all human beings when given the opportunity to exercise it, while reconstructivism has a more radical political ambition to actively change of society and constantly improve upon it.

The relations between these various agendas of education and the question of a differentiated or unified school system are, according to our interpretation, in some aspects possible to point out, although there are

no theoretically self-given relations. An educational philosophy that relies on tradition, predetermined knowledge content and the self-given legitimacy of academic disciplines connects to a conservative idea of keeping academic knowledge exclusive in a more differentiated school system. An educational philosophy of developing abilities in order to change society on the other hand connects more so to liberal ideas of unifying education and making knowledge and abilities available to all as a tool for change (cf. Evans 2004, Lundgren 2012). The axis dealing with the question on why we should educate may be extended by adding the philosophical terms formulated by Englund (1986) and the ideological struggle between a differentiated and a unified school model.

In order to capture, identify and analyze the traveling concept of social issue in *Samhällskunskap* and the way it relates to and are used within the various educational traditions presented in the above, we turn to a theory and methodology of discourse analysis, presented in the following.

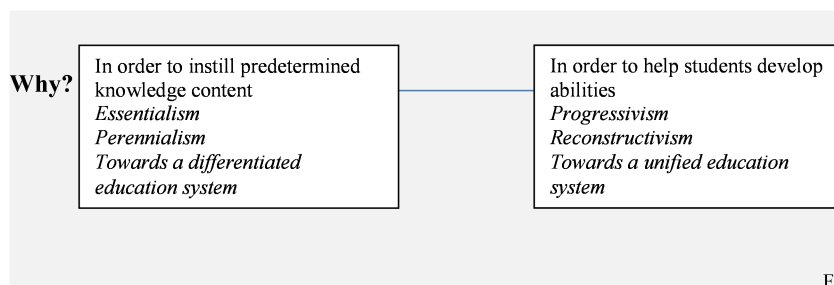


Fig. 2

#### 4.2 Discourse analyzing narratives of meaning-making syllabuses

A central concept in this study is the concept of discourse. Discourse should be understood as "language as social practice determined by social structures" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 17). According to Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, ideology and established power relations are embedded in discourse. When we express something, we tend to reproduce hierarchical relations by repeating traditional knowledge and notions that serve the interest of the already dominant groups in society (Fairclough, 1995). These hegemonies are protected by what we call "common sense", that is, notions that are never or seldom questioned and challenged. However, there are always possibilities to challenge traditional discourses and replace them through processes of discursive struggle (Fairclough, 1989).

In this study, we see syllabuses as texts which show traces of struggle and fixate the discursive hegemony at the present time. The texts thereby hold the power relations and the dominating apprehensions of the time and context in which they were constructed. This is a critical perspective that suggests explanations as to how and why society has developed as it has, connecting texts and local discourses to macro-level discourses based on materialized social facts and in dialectic relation to other social elements that are not discursive (Jørgensen and

Phillips 2002). This approach to discourse analysis differs from other discourse analyses that claim the discourse to be disconnected from ideas of non-discursive social elements, that is, an “extra-discursive reality”.

The discourse theory of Laclau & Mouffe (2001) is an example of an approach that has been criticized for not recognizing any social existences beyond discourse (cf. Townshend, 2004, p. 273). These approaches do not offer the same type of explanation as to why a certain discourse attains hegemony over another since there are no driving forces, behaviour structures or human tendencies beyond the discourse that may serve as an explanation (cf. Townshend, 2004). Nevertheless, the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (2001) offers analytical concepts that help identify the processes of discursive struggle in ways that are fruitful for discourse analyses, although one may not want to adopt the ontological presumptions of Laclau and Mouffe. Those analytical possibilities encouraged the researchers David Rear and Alan Jones (2013) to combine the methodological strengths of discourse theory with Norman Fairclough’s power-oriented social theory and critical discourse analysis, which is a theoretical line of thought we wish to follow in the present study. Fairclough himself, together with Chourliaraki (1999, p. 124 ff), enhances the idea of the theoretical merging when recognizing discourse theory (DT) as valuable for analyzing complexities of change in late modern society. The valuable contributions of DT are due to its confidence in the flexibility and power of language.

In this present study, we wish to identify the discursive processes connected to the development of the *Samhällskunskap*. This analysis takes as its point of departure the concept of social issue, which entered the syllabus in 1965 and retained its position as a more or less prominent keyword in all syllabuses thereafter.

As outlined in the above, the concept of social issue may relate to a number of didactical, epistemological and educational ideologies. How these ideologies are played out and how they struggle for hegemony in the discursive practices of educational policy-making is a question suited to scrutiny from a critical discourse analytical point of view. The concept of “social issues” retains a position in syllabuses over time, be it with association and connection to various and changing concepts and framings. In that sense, it can be seen as a contested concept. Within discourse theory, these concepts may be understood as both “nodal points” and “floating signifiers”. When to use one or the other of these analytical labels depends on our understanding of the state of the discursive struggle process and the status of the concept studied. A floating signifier may be a concept used within several struggling discourses and may thereby be vague and point to various meanings, while a nodal point may be a concept that determines other signs within hegemonic discourse:

Floating signifiers are the signs that different discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way. Nodal points are floating signifiers, but

whereas the term ‘nodal point’ refers to a crucial and structuring master-signifier within a specific discourse, the term ‘floating signifier’ belongs to the ongoing struggle between different discourses to fix the meaning of important signs. (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. xi)

We choose to label the concept of *social issues* as a floating significant because it reoccurs in all syllabuses from 1965 and thereafter, although used in various ways. In addition to this, the sign may in some syllabus (con)texts be understood as a nodal point in itself, as it in *some* texts seems to define and point out the direction for other concepts within a dominating educational discourse.

## 5 Method and materials

We aim to conduct a discourse analysis that follows the concept of *social issues* as it occurs in the syllabuses for the *Samhällskunskap* in upper secondary school from 1965 to 2011. The syllabuses are to various degrees complemented by other interpretative text materials from the national authorities of education. Some of these texts have also been analyzed and the motives for looking into these types of materials will be given in the analysis. Another type of text referred to in our analysis is curriculum.

Curricula and syllabuses are national policy documents that steer schools at different levels. A curriculum in the Swedish school system is the major steering document for schools—it describes and lists the overall goals and guidelines, the fundamental values and tasks of the school, as well as the structure of the school system. Syllabuses cover the contents and goals of specific subjects and courses. The connection between these two types of policy documents has differed slightly over time. Generally they are closely connected though, and a syllabus reform comes with a curriculum reform. However, there are also examples of syllabus reforms within an existing curriculum. Focus will mostly be on the syllabuses, since they represent internal discourse of the subject in focus, although some references are made to the curricula which, although there are no self-given relation between the two types of policy documents, the syllabuses are expected to accord with.

These following syllabuses were analyzed. The right column shows which curriculum each syllabus relates to:

Syllabus	Curriculum
Syllabus of <i>Samhällskunskap</i> for 3-year programs at upper secondary school, 1965.	Curriculum for upper secondary school 1965 (Lgy 65).
Syllabuses of <i>Samhällskunskap</i> for 3-year programs at upper secondary school, 1970.	Curriculum for upper secondary school 1970 (Lgy 70).
Syllabus of <i>Samhällskunskap</i> (for all programs, academic and vocational) at upper secondary school, 1988.	
Syllabus of <i>Samhällskunskap</i> (for all programs) at upper secondary school, 1994.	Curriculum for upper secondary school 1994 (Lpf 94).
Syllabus of <i>Samhällskunskap</i> (for all programs) at upper secondary school, 2000.	
Subject syllabus of <i>Samhällskunskap</i> for upper secondary school 2011.	Curriculum for upper secondary school 2011 (Gy11).

The syllabuses were read through systematically with focus on the concept of *social issues*. An indicator of the status of the concept is the way it relates to other concepts in the text, that is its “internal relations” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 36). What other concepts and terms are mentioned in close connection to the concept of social issues? In what ways do they give meaning to each other? Is the concept of social issues clarified through the use of other terms, sentences, lines of thoughts – or vice versa?

Besides these internal relations, there are also reasons to look at intertextual relations, that is, how the texts that include the concept of social issues “draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize and dialogue with other texts” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 17). In this perspective, other texts should be understood not only as actual texts but also as ideas and traditions. In this step of the analysis, we will draw upon the philosophies of education outlined by Englund (1986) that may be seen as educational discourses struggling for hegemony. While the internal analyses will primarily be made in the analysis of section 6, the intertextual interpretations will be outlined in the final discussion of this article.

This discourse analytical reading of the syllabuses is theoretically anchored in critical discourse analysis, which is presented in the above. A critical discourse analysis allows us to explain certain uses of concepts in relation to societal struggle for power. Methodologically, we use concepts as *floating signifiers* and *nodal points*, borrowed from the discourse theory of Laclau & Mouffe (2001), since they allow us to grasp crucial elements in processes of rapidly changing discourses. Reading the term *social issue* as a floating signifier helps us analytically to see the shifting meanings of the term. In some syllabus texts, the term *social issue* may be interpreted as a nodal point, that is, a point of reference that other terms are oriented towards, and with the potential to function as an organizing principle for lesson activities. In other syllabus texts the term is not given that kind of function.

## 6 Analysis - Following the concept of *social issues*

This section is structured in a chronological order, analyzing the concept of *social issues* as it appears in the syllabuses from 1965 to the current date. Each headline shows a shift in how the floating signifier *social issues* is to be understood.

### 6.1 Social issues - One feature of the content

The first syllabus for *Samhällskunskap* for upper secondary school appeared in 1965 within the context of a very detailed content-based curriculum. The syllabus regulates *what* content should be studied as well as for *which school year* it applies. Seven main elements capture the content in very open terms. These are

- Population, settlements, industry and commerce in different natural circumstances and under different economic, political and social conditions.
  - Economics and political economy.
  - Community planning.
  - Government, political life, political views.
  - Forming of opinions.
  - International politics and economy.
  - Current social issues.
- (Lgy 65)

The concept of *social issues* is here presented along with the other “main elements” and is in this case fairly void of content. The established notion of teaching in general, well in line with the curriculum being set by its content rather than by its goals, is that of teaching a predetermined content. The hegemony of this discourse is not challenged to any greater extent yet. The concept of social issues is not given a special status in relation to other concepts in the syllabus. Yet, there are some indications that *social issues* have a different status or role compared with other content. Social issues reflect a kind of aggregate of the knowledge of other main elements, since the aim of this particular main element is that the students “on the grounds of acquired knowledge and skills seek to clarify some important social issues” (Lgy 65). This rather clear way of giving a fairly central concept meaning by relating it to other central concepts indicates that the concept may be analyzed in terms of a floating signifier (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 28). The choice of understanding the concept with this analytical term is further strengthened as the very same concept reoccurs in all the following syllabuses, be it with floating meanings as we exemplify below.

As early as 1970, along with a new curriculum, there was a small revision in the syllabus and the floating signifier *social issues* was given a slightly different meaning than it had in the prior syllabus. *Social issues* was still presented as content among the other “main elements”, but the aim now was “on the grounds of acquired knowledge and skills” to “analyze and discuss social issues” (Lgy 70, suppl. 11, p. 305). The idea that teaching *Samhällskunskap* also involves analyzing and discussing, especially when it comes to social issues, represents a shift regarding which surrounding concepts give meaning to the floating signifier *social issues*. These

new concepts involved in the meaning-making of *social issues* are verbs (analyze and discuss) dictating *how* to deal with social issues. The concept is thereby associated with a certain kind of action.

The National Board of Education has published recommendations as complements to the syllabus. Here we may read that there are several descriptions of the subject that lean towards a more progressive, problem-based view of it. Studying *Samhällskunskap* should be “a process where debating problems and analyzing contexts should be natural” (Lgy70, suppl. 38, p. 5). It is also clear that “current social issues” refers to more than just news coverage – the term “current” is not the central one in this concept; rather, it is to be understood as “areas of problems” (Lgy 70, suppl. 38, p. 5). The selection of “current social issues” is to be a process where students are involved (Lgy 70, suppl. 38, p. 16). There is a shift in the function of the floating signifier *social issues*, as this specific “main element” cannot be completely predetermined. These complementary recommendations also point out how the students are supposed to develop analytical skills which are supposedly honed through a problem-based approach (Lgy 70, suppl. 38, p. 5).

Along with this development, a first step was taken in Sweden in the early 1960s towards a less differentiated school system. Still the upper secondary school was divided into different fields of study, along a general division of academic and non-academic programs, with different syllabuses for *Samhällskunskap*. In some programs the subject was only offered as an elective course, but in general the view of *social issues* as a content along with other contents does not differ very much between the programs. However, for some of the non-academic programs, there is a sentence in the planning supplement of the syllabus that gives the concept of *social issues* a slightly different meaning: it says that “teaching generally takes a point of departure in social issues” (Lgy70, suppl. , p. 183). As we will see in the syllabus of 1988, this wording will serve to push the floating signifier *social issues* towards another discourse. However, in 1970, the term was still used within a discourse of teaching predetermined subject content. The section in the curriculum stating general aspects of instruction starts by claiming that “teaching is to be objective” (Lgy 70, p. 26). The floating signifier of *social issues* functions therefore as nothing more than a mild suggestion to steer the didactical plans of some teachers without affecting the predetermined content.

## 6.2 Social issues as a point of departure

A new syllabus for *Samhällskunskap* in upper secondary school was introduced in 1988 (Suppl. 1988:82) *without* a total reform including a new curriculum. In some aspects the new syllabus comprises a number of the fundamental ideas that later appeared in the curriculum of 1994. A non-differentiated school model had been realized for elementary and secondary school in the early 1960's. There were also plans to reform upper secondary school and to make it less differentiated. A step in that direction was taken with the new syllabus for *Samhällskunskap*.

The content of the syllabus needed to be formulated in such a way that made it possible to choose focus depending on the student group. The goals of the syllabus also needed to be formulated in such a way that they were attainable regardless of how much time the subject was allocated. The solution, according to Bjessmo (1992), was to give *social issues* a very central role in the syllabus. Instead of being a content among other contents, it was to become *the point of departure* for all studies on the subject, no matter the content. In that way, the concept of *social issues* may be understood as the organizing principle for teaching *Samhällskunskap*.

The students shall, from studying different social issues, that connect to their experiences, needs and interests, attain widened and deepened knowledge about ... (Suppl. 1988, p. 82).

The concept of *social issues* is clearly used to turn the notion of the subject and the teaching of it towards a more progressive discourse. As a floating signifier, *social issues* is here used to capture the essence of the subject within a discourse emphasizing the activity of the students and the integrated character of the subject. Using the analytical tool of Laclau & Mouffe, we argue that the concept is here turned into a nodal point. The main elements are fewer and the description of content more limited. It is also a matter of organization of the syllabus, where the concept of social issues is placed as an umbrella term, before the main elements are mentioned. It can be argued that this is not a sudden change. In commentary materials from the National Board of Education about the syllabus of 1970, this line of thought was already being presented in the late 1970's, and a reform of the curriculum for elementary and secondary school in 1980 had also taken a step in this direction. With the syllabus of 1988 and by the positioning of *social issues* as a key concept in the subject, *Samhällskunskap* is to be understood as a subject in opposition to predetermined content knowledge, both in relation to working methods and teaching approaches as well as in relation to the purpose of education (see figure 1). The how-question is dealt with through an inquiry-based, integrated approach and the why-question focuses more on the abilities and skills to be developed. The predetermined knowledge content is toned down in both these parameters. This prominent position of the concept makes it relevant to understand it as a nodal point in the educational discourse on *Samhällskunskap*.

## 6.3 A new curriculum in line with the progressive syllabus

With a national curriculum reform in 1994, the next step was taken towards a less differentiated school. All study programs in upper secondary school were to cover three years (previously the vocational programs were two years long) and a set of “core subjects” was supposed to be taught with the same syllabuses for all programs. *Samhällskunskap* was one of them – although history



was not – which marks the importance given to the subject. Another central aspect in the reform was that the school was to be steered by goals rather than by content. This did not mean that the content was made invisible in the curriculum, but from that point on it was formulated as subordinate to the goals.

These changes are also reflected in the assessment system. Students were to be assessed in relation to criteria instead of to each other. These criteria were seldom very specific regarding the content but were rather focused on skills. These changes are in line with a progressive discourse expressed in the syllabus of 1988 through the central concept of *social issues*. In the new syllabus following the curriculum from 1994, *social issues* may be seen as the nodal point, functioning as an organizing principle of the field of Social Studies and thereby giving meaning to other concepts within the discourse. The goal of the basic course of *Samhällskunskap* (which is the same in all study programs) is that

...students deepen and structure their knowledge about society, working life and economy by studying different social issues (KP 1994:66).

The concept of *social issues* then appears – instead of specific predetermined content – in the criteria for assessment:

Students participate in and take some responsibility in planning their study in *Samhällskunskap*. In the study of different social issues the student seeks, uses and presents relevant facts, domestic as well as international. The student views the issues from different perspective and values and states reasons and consequences of the chosen question (KP 1994:66).

Instead of pointing out the content in terms of “main element”, we can in the syllabus of 1994 see a general description of what the subject should cover through all its courses. There is a list of “areas of knowledge” which is followed by this statement: “[t]hese areas of knowledge contain many social issues which can form the point of departure for studies and analysis” (KP 1994:65). Thus, the function of social issues in the syllabus is radically different from 1970, being the nodal point of the subject.

#### 6.4 A step towards more focus on content

In 2000, a reform of the syllabuses was once again carried out without a renewal of the whole curriculum. Just as the syllabus of 1988 showed aspects that came to be fundamental in the 1994 curriculum reform, the syllabus of 2000 showed signs of what later came to be central in the 2011 curriculum reform. In the syllabus of 2000, the overall goal of the subject *Samhällskunskap* was still “to deepen the students’ knowledge about current conditions in society and social issues” (Gy 2000). The term social issues is also present and central in the overall description of the subject. *Social issues* is meant

to be “a natural point of departure” when deciding *what* to study, and this should be a decision made by teachers and students together. Unlike in the syllabus of 1994, the texts state which academic disciplines the subjects comprise (from a core of political science and economics to the inclusion of sociology, cultural geography and law).

The design of the syllabus was also changed in 2000. In the syllabus from 1994, each course had an overall goal in which *social issues* was the point of departure. In 2000, these types of goals were moved to the general description of the subject. The concept is still there, but the change in position within the organization of the syllabus shows how the floating signifier now changes. In the overall objective of the subject, *social issues* is no longer pointed out as being the point of departure: what is pointed out is that the subject should *lead to* (our italics) “knowledge about [...] social issues” (Gy 2000). In the syllabus of the basic course in *Samhällskunskap*, *social issues* is still present as a central concept in the goal description, just as it is in the previous syllabus. The concept is still represented in the text, but has lost its ground as the organizing, nodal point of the subject.

The criteria for assessment in the syllabus of 2000 focus slightly more on the content knowledge than on the skills that students are expected to develop. The discourse has over time turned towards focusing on a predetermined content, and the inquiry-based model for the classroom activities is not as emphasized as it once was. The floating signifier *social issues* is still represented in the text, and there are sentences showing its central position. In a section about the character of the subject, the syllabus claims that “[t]hrough the selection of social issues the width and rapid change of the subject is made clear” (Gy 2000). Evidently *social issues* are still important, but the syllabus does not say if the students are expected to choose what issues they want to study. A slight shift of status of the term is a sign of a change in discourse. The concept of *social issues* is no longer the nodal point for the comprehension of the subject.

#### 6.5 Social Issues in a syllabus focusing on content and abilities

During the first decade of the new millennium, a political discourse claimed that school was in need of more clarity and order. Students should not be in doubt about what they need to learn, and teachers should focus more on assessment. This discourse is captured by Biesta (2010), who describes it as an “age of measurement”. The discourse moves in two directions in the latest curriculum reform of 2011. On the one hand, the suggested need for clarity when it comes to content leads to a more predetermined content (in all subjects), a fact pointed out by the new term *core content*. On the other hand, emphasis is on assessment that should be based on abilities.

A new structure of the steering documents came with the curriculum of 2011, with the intention of being consistent through all its parts. The structure goes from

describing the aim of the subject to the core content in each course followed by the criteria used for assessment in relation to certain abilities. The term “subject plan” was used instead of “syllabus”. There was a combination of pointing out the content in more detail than previously, while assessment was still focused on abilities that students are supposed to develop *through* specific content knowledge.

The term *social issues* was still present in the description of the subject and in the criteria for assessment. Once again there was the idea that teaching ought to take “point of departure in different social issues” (Gy11, Subject plan, Samhällskunskap). In addition, a couple of criteria for assessment deal with *social issues*, like for example: “In the work with social issues the student shows ability to [...] seek, criticize and interpret information of different sources” (Gy11, Subject plan, Samhällskunskap). If the syllabus were read without the reader taking into account the discourse of the time, the impression may be that *social issues* were still crucial for the comprehension and character of the subject. However, set in relation to other signifiers, such as the strongly emphasized *core content* and the focus on assessment, *social issues* can no longer be viewed as being the nodal point of the subject. Also, commentary materials with more didactic argumentation state that the studies “could be organized around social issues” (Skolverket 2011, subject commentaries Social Studies).

## 7 Discussion

Initially in this article the development of the Swedish school system was outlined as being a struggle between proponents of a differentiated school model and a more unified one. These models follow two opposite logics which may be captured by different answers to the following historical question: *for whom is education and why?* The same question is also relevant for the philosophies, or educational discourses as we here wish to understand them, referred to in the above: essentialism, perennialism, progressivism and reconstructionism (cf. Englund 1997)<sup>iii</sup>. While the first two (essentialism and perennialism) strengthen an idea of a differentiated school model in the stressing of the importance of academic disciplines and traditionally established sets of knowledge, the other two (progressivism and reconstructionism) challenge these ideas by wanting to use education as tools for societal change towards equal chances for all. The four philosophies of education can also be categorized into two entities, where essentialism and perennialism both embrace an idea of a predetermined subject content and the other two open up for something different. In that sense, they also—be it not as clearly—indicate certain positions in the didactical question of “how”: what methods should we use in studies of society when striving to educate students to become good

citizens?

In the present study on how the concept of *social issues* is used over time in syllabuses, we have identified crucial turning points which may be seen to be expressions of larger educational discourses of educational philosophies and ideologies of differentiated versus unified school models. The single most crucial turning point is to be found in the syllabus of 1988 where the term *social issues* emerges not only as a central term but also as an organizing principle that defines the way in which the possible contents of the subject ought to be framed and tackled. The concept of *social issues* is represented in all syllabuses in Social Studies (*Samhällskunskap*) in Swedish upper secondary school from 1965 to 2011, and was presented as a central didactic principle (a nodal point, speaking to Laclau & Mouffe 2001, p. xi) with a new and very specific meaning and function in the syllabus of 1988. The concept of social issues may here be said to strengthen a discourse of progressivism and educational change towards a unified school model. Focusing on the *social issues* rather than pointing out the content in detail opened up for progressive thoughts around content and the value of a stable core of knowledge. Further, this may be seen as a chance to take steps towards less differentiation as it made it possible to have the same syllabus for different programs in the upper secondary school although the subject was allocated a different number of hours per week depending on the program (vocational on the one hand and academic on the other). However, the findings of prior research (cf. Bronäs 2000, Odenstad 2010), show that this syllabus-logic that may open up for a unified subject of *Samhällskunskap* is not manifested in teaching practice. This strengthens an interpretation that the relation between the discursive level of steering documents and the teaching practices is complex and depends on various actors at various levels in the educational system and broader society.

The answer to the question of “for whom and why” is broadened in the syllabus from 1988 compared with what had existed prior. The school subject with its special task in laying the foundation for democracy is now more inclusive and the content is subordinate to the abilities students are supposed to develop. This new way of viewing the subject, with *social issues* as *the* central

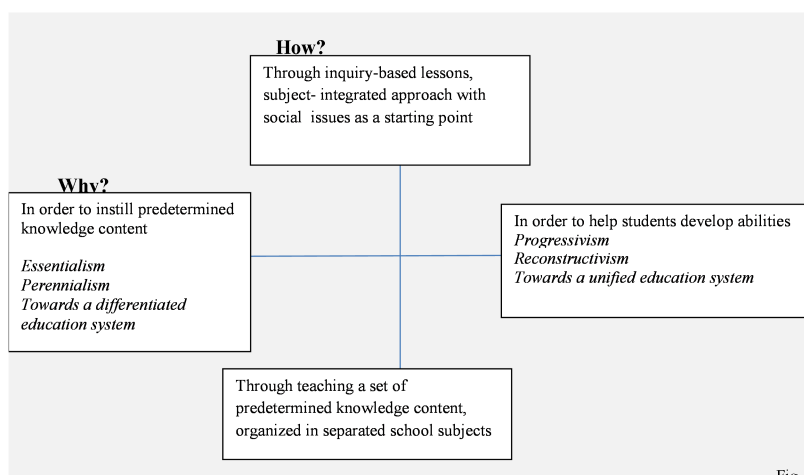


Fig. 3

concept, also indicates a position in the question of “how”. The syllabus from 1988 dictates a more problem- and issues-oriented teaching. In the model presented above (and shown here), there is a shift in 1988 from the bottom left corner to the upper right. *Samhällskunskap* used to be conceived as being a subject with predetermined content and the teaching was organized following this content, well-defined by its separate subjects. With the syllabus from 1988, the subject changes into an inquiry-based model with social issues as the point of departure. The overall aim reaches further than the reproduction of specific content.

The curriculum reform of 1994, including a new syllabus for *Samhällskunskap*, came as a logical continuation of the changes seen in the 1988 syllabus. With the 1994 reform, the Swedish school system made a fundamental shift to steering via learning outcomes rather than content. In that model, *social issues* is well suited as being the organizing principle of *Samhällskunskap*. The goals were formulated in terms of *abilities*. The content was described to a certain extent, but it was not specified in detail. The changing position of *social issues* in 1988, kept in the syllabus of 1994, also reflects a change of discourse towards a more progressive one. Along with that position also followed a fairly open definition of *social issues*. Neither the syllabus nor the commentary materials are clear on what can be defined as a *social issue*, and Bjessmo has shown that it was not clear to teachers how to separate social issues from “main elements” of the subject (Bjessmo, 1992).

The pendulum of educational philosophies swung back towards a more essentialistic position during the latter part of the century. A first sign is the revision of the syllabus in 2000 within the curriculum of 1994. A new discourse on education focusing on accountability and measurement (see Biesta, 2011) was on the rise and gave direction to the reform. The effect was that *social issues* did not disappear from the syllabus but no longer did it have the same prominent role as a nodal point. Yet another step in the direction towards more essentialism and less progressivism came with the latest reform of 2011 when there was a call for more “clarity” as to *what* students should learn. But although the syllabus is more detailed, the system, of assessment is still formed around the students’ abilities. One may say that the desired abilities are supposed to develop through knowledge about specific, predetermined content. It could be confusing when on the one hand the term *social issues* is still in the syllabus, be it not in an as prominent position, and on the other hand the content is pointed out in more detail.

In our analysis, we have outlined how the concept of *social issues* is used in syllabuses for *Samhällskunskap* in upper secondary school from 1965 to 2011. Our analysis has shown how the frequency, status and relation to other concepts varies over time, and that there has been a peak where the concept was very central and defined how the subject should be handled didactically, while it now rather appears in competition with other concepts. The declining status of the concept in itself points

towards other educational ideals that are not as progressive or student-centered.

Our second research question was about what role the concept plays in a larger educational context and in connection to normative ideas of the role of education in general and the role of the subject *Samhällskunskap* specifically. One aspect that is important to highlight in relation to this question is the discursive struggle that takes place not only on the syllabus-arena but also in the intertextual tension between policy documents and teaching practices. From a discourse analytical perspective, all these arenas and levels may be seen as partakers of dialectical interaction where, speaking to Fairclough (1995, 2003), ideologies and uses of language in various contexts connect to politics and societal circumstances at a macro level. Even though the relations between the different practices in an education system are not always obvious, there are reasons to believe that they affect each other as regards ways of speaking, thinking and acting. It should, however, be stressed that the signifiers identifiable in syllabus texts (such as *social issues*) are involved in a complex relationship with other signifiers in the educational world – signifiers that are to be found in teachers’ reflections and habits (cf. Sandahl, 2011; Bernmark-Ottosson, 2009; Lindmark, 2013), textbooks (Bronäs, 2000) and tests (Odenstad, 2010).

In our study, we have shown how the term *social issues* is brought to the fore as a signifier of unifying educational ideals at a syllabus-level. It seems as if the syllabus arena is open to these kinds of signifiers at certain times when ideas of a unified education system dominate, while they tend to be downplayed at times when unifying forces are not as strong. In that sense, we claim to have identified an important discursive landmark in the syllabuses analyzed. Our study indicates that the syllabus arena rather rapidly incorporates ideological change, while the arenas mentioned above are more tenacious. It could of course be argued that the activities in school are what matter and should thereby be the main object for research. On the other hand there is – we claim – a certain value in looking into these more changeable text arenas since they much more rapidly show political tendencies and educational trends, which thereby makes them possible to identify and discuss.

When it comes to how the educational discourses of *Samhällskunskap* contribute to differentiation or unification of the school system, the different arenas in the school system and their connections to each other need further investigation. To what extent the organizing and didactical implications are noticeable when the concept of *social issues* emerges as a nodal point in syllabus discourses is a question for further research. This study contributes, from our point of view, to the discussion in terms of how the level of syllabus-texts deals with the struggle between conflicting ideological and political interests and the way in which the didactical principle of *social issues* is used as a tool in this struggle. What remains a crucial question is how teachers take part in discursive struggles that may be described as a

struggle between philosophies of what knowledge is and ideologies of how education in Social Studies may contribute to a just society.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> *Samhällskunskap* is translated into the term Social Studies in the present study, since it is an internationally well-known term often used as an umbrella term for school subjects dealing with social science. A more direct translation of the word *Samhälls* (society-) *kunskap* (knowledge) is "knowledge about society".

<sup>ii</sup> The title was *Samhällsfrågan är fri [The Social Issue is free]* The Swedish use of the term "free" should be understood in terms of "free to choose".

<sup>iii</sup> In this analysis, we use the educational philosophies of essentialism and progressivism as opposite analytical positions. This is due to the fact that essentialism is connected to academic knowledge rather than the perennialistic emphasis on tradition and thereby seem to be more relevant for argumentation in upper secondary school. Likewise, the progressive stressing on student activity and the developing of abilities is more relevant in this context than the more politically explicit reconstructivist philosophy of societal change. The two positions of perennialism and reconstructivism are relevant to our understanding of the field although not analytically used in this analysis of syllabus texts